

James Russell Lowell.

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

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BY

GEORGE B. MERRILL.





James Russell Lowell.

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"When beggars die there are no comets seen;  
The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes."

THE universal uprising of the intelligent English-speaking world to pay tribute to the eminent worth of James Russell Lowell, who died on the 12th of last August, shows that the judgment of those people has already placed him among the princes of thought. For fifty years he had been known, less or more widely, in the worlds—first of letters, and later of public affairs. He had gained his earliest laurels as an American poet, and his latest as an American diplomat and statesman; and, meantime, he had "won golden opinions from all sorts of people," in turn as poet, satirist, essayist, critic, orator, conversationist, and, always, gentleman.

He was born at Elmwood in Cambridge on Washington's birthday in 1819, and died in the house in which he was born. He entered Harvard at the age of sixteen, in the

class of 1838, with Charles Devens, afterwards a Judge of the Supreme Court of Massachusetts, and W. W. Story, later a law-writer, sculptor and poet.

Rank in college seemed not a matter of concern to him. He used to say that, while there he "read almost everything, except the text books prescribed by the faculty." To certain studies, especially mathematics, he had an invincible repugnance; wherein I perceive, that he and your servant were nearly akin.

What books he had not already devoured at home he found at his hand in the college library; and if he found less favor with his tutors and professors because his tastes diverged from the curriculum, he has found more favor with the world of educated men ever since, because by natural instinct and cultivated taste he kept his mind constantly open to the mellowing and enriching influences of the purest literature, and found there the aliment that nurtured him into the man he became.

In college his literary promise was early recognized, and he was made one of the editors of the college magazine, "*Harvardiana*."

His verses had such success that he was chosen poet of the Hasty Pudding Club in his senior year and class poet

afterwards. In the last term of his senior year he was suspended and sent to Concord, with the added penalty of being forbidden to return to read the class poem he had written. But on Class Day he stole down from Concord in a covered wagon, and through the chinks of the canvas cover saw his classmates singing about the tree. After leaving college he entered the law school and took his degree of LL.B. He then opened an office in Court Street, Boston.

A great lawyer once said that, whoever would make himself famous in the law must first learn "to eat sawdust without butter." Mr. Lowell's finer taste did not relish, and his circumstances did not compel, that juiceless diet. He wrote, however, a story for the "*Boston Miscellany*," entitled, "*My First Client*." That personage was probably mythical, and there is no record of a second. He soon decided that his sacrifices would not be graciously received at the shrine of Themis, and he closed his office and went back to his library.

Before he was twenty-two he published his first volume of poems, and Margaret Fuller honored him so far as to notice them in "*The Dial*," and said, that "neither their imagery nor their music was his own."



At the age of twenty-four he was one of the editors of "The Pioneer," a magazine, whose contents were of unexceptionable merit, but it was in advance of the time, and it expired after its third number. At twenty-five he published a second volume of poems, and a prose work, "Conversations upon the Poets." Before he was thirty he had published the first series of the Biglow Papers, "The Vision of Sir Launfal," and "The Fable for Critics."

I am not quite sure that there was any malice in any line of *The Fable*, but among those who believe in a reciprocal tit-for-tat among critics, it seems to me that it will be generally agreed that, if the author had in mind Margaret Fuller in depicting the character of Miranda, he quite fully repaid any debt he owed her, for her depreciation of his first volume of poetry.

In 1853 and 1854 he contributed essays and poems to Putnam's Magazine, and in the following year, at the age of thirty-six, he was appointed Smith Professor of the French and Spanish languages and literatures and Professor of Belles-Lettres at Harvard, to succeed Mr. Longfellow, with two years' leave of absence in Europe to add to his already great acquisitions in the literature of the



modern languages. He returned in 1857 and assumed the duties of the chair.

He was editor of the "Atlantic Monthly" from its beginning in 1857 till 1862, and of the "North American Review" for the nine years following.

Between 1864 and 1870 he published a second series of the Biglow Papers, two volumes of poems, "The Fireside Travels," and two volumes of critical essays, "Among my Books."

His last volume of prose, "Democracy and other Addresses," was published in 1887, and his last volume of poems, "Heartsease and Rue," in 1888.

In hastening over the narrative of his published works, we must not forget the service he rendered Harvard and the whole body of his fellow compatriots, when he delivered in Cambridge, on the 21st of July, 1865, "The Commemoration Ode," which he dedicated, "To the ever sweet and shining memory of ninety-three sons of Harvard College, who have died for their country in the war of nationality." The occasion was historic, and marked by the presence of many illustrious survivors of the war. The poem was the highest utterance of patriotism, and has long since taken rank among the finest contributions to American poetic literature.

Upon these productions rests Mr. Lowell's fame as a writer. The world's attention was not called to him as a poet, until the publication of the Biglow Papers. Under the ripple of humor and sarcasm and eddying wit, that floated on the surface, was a deep under-current of intense, earnest feeling. Alternating with verses that excited mirth only, were verses of the purest emotion, and while critics, looking for instances of his highest poetic flights, turn to the severer lines of his commemorative odes, or to "The Cathedral," suggested by his presence in the old gothic cathedral of Chartres—

"Imagination's very self in stone"—

it seems to me that "The Vision," and others of his simpler poems show deeper poetic inspirations, and that aroused sympathies, and indignation excited against wrongs, real or fancied, expressed themselves in lines and verses of the Biglow Papers with a controlling pathos, a profound depth, a superlative wisdom, that lifted them far above the level of mere political satire, and have saved them from the fate of merely occasional utterances.

Mr. Lowell had never sought nor accepted any public office. He began his public career at the top, and after the age of fifty-seven. In 1877, after declining the

appointment as Minister to Austria, tendered him by Mr. Hayes, he accepted that to Spain, as one congenial to his tastes, and opening the way to the further study of Cervantes and Spanish literature which he was then pursuing. After three years' service in the latter country he was, upon the retirement of Minister Welsh, transferred to the Court of St. James.

Mr. Lowell had every reason to know that the appointment was acceptable to the English people. Oxford had in 1873 conferred upon him the degree of D.C.L., and Cambridge in 1874, that of LL.D., and he doubtless felt the kindly favor of the salutation that came through the columns of "The Spectator," wherein he was welcomed as "His Excellency The Ambassador of American Literature to the Court of Shakespeare."

The record of his life as minister is not that of many or difficult negotiations. The steamship and the cable have brought foreign countries so near us that the responsibility of the ambassador to foreign courts has almost wholly passed away. But when his services were needed in behalf of the Republic he was equal to the demands.

He went thither as the author of the verses "Jonathan to John," the severest rebuke received by England for her

attitude during the civil war, and conscious also of his severity in 1869, in his essay on "A Certain Condescension of Foreigners," and he knew that it was for him to solve the difficult problem of reconciling the two great branches of the English speaking world. Yet he bore himself in a friendly and dignified manner from the first. Englishmen had scarcely recovered from their old idea that there were no books published in America worth their notice. To such it was fitting to send one who could and did show by his personal presence, that America has made some progress besides that merely material, and that even here may be found the gifts and graces that obtain in countries which have passed beyond the early unlettered condition of national existence. He easily showed that in the literature of the English language he was not their pupil, and that in political philosophy—the pursuit of the most enlightened statesmen—he had progressed as far as they, and that in the arts of civilized life and the graces of social existence, he was more than their equal. He went thither a stranger, and by his singular and varied gifts, his brilliant wit, his refined taste, his serene judgment, his rich and fascinating conversation, he made English society respect and admire and love him, and unconsciously help to solve the problem,



which argument and contention could scarcely have done.

Every son of Harvard feels a pride in the gracious personality that stood for America in England during the period of Mr. Lowell's ambassadorship. We know the power that great moral and intellectual resources, brilliant wit and distinguished manners exert. It would seem as if they exercised a spell over the former obdurate heart of the British nation; for the best of England ran with flying feet to do honor to the best of America. Every British fireside blazed higher at his coming; the halls of learning opened their doors to do him reverence; and men of literature and learning stood to accord him the meed of appreciation and praise. No literary fête was complete without his presence. The authors of England asked his speech, and the authors of America listened to the delightful words he spake. And we now hear with added pride and pleasure the English acknowledgment, that he was "the best after-dinner speaker in England since the death of Dickens, and that no man since Lord Houghton has been invited to unveil so many statues and assist, as the central figure, at so many public ceremonies, attesting the respect of England for her own."

He stood in Westminster and unveiled the bust of Samuel

Taylor Coleridge. He made the address there at the uncovering the memorial to Longfellow, and of that to Dean Stanley. He unveiled the bust of Samuel Pepys, in the old church of St. Olaves in London, the bust of Gray at Pembroke College, and that of Fielding at Taunton, in Somersetshire.

His popularity in England even excited the vanity of some British hearts into the belief that he had become disamericanized. They did not see that Americanism gave the color to his blood; but the film was removed from their eyes when he stood before the subjects of Her Majesty at Birmingham and uttered his address upon "Democracy," that splendid tribute to popular government, which verified his patriotism as one of his most sensitive qualities, and in which, as many of us would not, he claimed the beneficent effect of our institutions upon the untamed immigrant, almost as if it were a universal truth. He said:

"We have taken from Europe the poorest, the most ignorant, the most turbulent of her people and have made them over into good citizens, who have added to our wealth, and who are ready to die in defence of a country and of institutions, which they know to be worth dying for."

At the unveiling of Gray, feeling it to be probably the last occasion of addressing Englishmen in public, he expressed gratitude for the kindness which had surrounded him for the preceding four years in both official and private life, and had made both delightful. He said he had come among them "as a far-away cousin, and they were sending him away as something very like a brother."

And "Punch," which we have been taught to heed as the chosen representative of British wit and culture, replied:

"Send *you* away? No, Lowell, no,  
That phrase indeed is scarce well chosen;  
We're glad of course, to have you go  
More like a brother than a cousin.  
True, we must 'speed the parting guest,'  
If such a guest from us must sever;  
But what we all should like the best,  
Would be to keep you here forever."

Mr. Lowell was accredited with always understanding the demands of office upon him. And so it proved that "his correspondence was accurate, and that it enlightened the Secretary of State on the very points on which he wanted to be enlightened." At the risk of wearying you, I will read a part of a dispatch sent by him to the Secretary of State, from Madrid, in July, 1888:

"One of the devices of Fourcarde, which came within



M. Silvelo's own knowledge when in another department of the government, is so ingenious and amusing as to be worth recounting. The Frenchman's object was to smuggle petroleum into Madrid without paying the octroi. To this end he established store-houses in the suburbs, and then, hiring all the leanest and least mammalian women that could be found, he made good all their physical defects with tin cases filled with petroleum, thus giving them, what Dr. Johnson would have called, the pectoral proportions of Juno. Doubtless he blasphemed the unwise parsimony of nature in denying to women in general the multitudinous breasts displayed by certain Hindoo Idols. For some time these seemingly milky mothers passed without question into the unsuspecting city, and supplied thousands of households with that cheap enlightenment which cynics say is worse than none. Meanwhile M. Fourcarde's pockets swelled in proportion to the quaker breastworks of the improvised wet-nurses. Could he only have been moderate! Could he only have bethought him in time of the *ne quid nimis*! But one fatal day he sent in a damsel whose contours aroused in one of the guardians at the gates the same emotions as those of Maritornes in the bosom of the carrier. With the playful gallantry of a superior he tapped the object of his admiration, and it tinkled. He had struck oil unawares. Love shook his wings and fled. Duty retired frowning, and M. Fourcarde's perambulating wells suddenly went dry."

If diplomats were accustomed to thus enliven their dispatches, the volumes of diplomatic correspondence would rival in interest the popular novels of the day.

Frankness, and boldness and firmness to principle, and independence in thought and action, were crowning virtues of Mr. Lowell's character. He was in politics as the thinker is, suggesting and upholding right and boldly battling against corruption and the low political methods that point only to selfish, personal gains. His diplomatic course, his public political addresses, manifested the broad thinking and the far sight, and earned him the name, of a statesman. And to be of his followers and to espouse his principles and to give one's aid to the cause that he believed in, was to honor one's self and to be sure that he was being, primarily at least, the tool of no mere politician, and the support of no mere party hack.

Every man who honors the higher qualities of independence and manhood, took pride in him when in an address at a meeting of the Tariff Reform League in Boston, December 29th, 1887, he said:

"This is no doubt a political meeting; but most of us would not be here, I certainly should not be here, had this been a conspiracy in the interest of any party, or of

any faction within a party—had it been, that is to say, political in that ill sense which our practice, if not our theory, has given to what should be the noblest exercise of man's intellect and the best training of his character."

He was independent enough to say, in alluding to the message to Congress—which was one of the reasons of the meeting—by the President who had recalled him from the English mission:

"Personally I confess that I feel myself strongly attracted to Mr. Cleveland as the best representative of the higher type of Americanism that we have seen since Lincoln was snatched from us. And by Americanism I mean, that which we cannot help, not that which we flaunt, that way of looking at things and of treating men, which we derive from the soil that holds our fathers, and waits for us."

This was a practical exemplification of what he had many years before written:

"I honor the man who is ready to sink  
Half his present repute for the freedom to think;  
And when he has thought, be his cause strong or weak,  
Will risk t'other half for the freedom to speak,  
Caring naught for what vengeance the mob has in store,  
Let that mob be the upper ten thousand, or lower."

The year following, in an address which he delivered

in Steinway Hall, New York, April 13th, 1888, upon "The Independent in Politics," he as boldly and manfully and consistently declared:

"I am thankful to have been the contemporary of one and among the greatest, of whom I think it is safe to say, that no other country and no other form of government could have fashioned him, and whom posterity will recognize as the wisest and most bravely human of modern times. It is a benediction to have lived in the same age and in the same country with Abraham Lincoln."

There was one quality, whose nature it is not to obtrude itself, and which was Mr. Lowell's, pre-eminently.

In his delightful epistle to Geo. Wm. Curtis, whom he addresses as one of

"Such high-bred manners, such good-natured wit,"

Mr. Lowell wrote also:

"Old Crestien rightly says, no language can  
Express the worth of a true gentleman."

And in that noble address which Mr. Lowell read upon the 250th anniversary of Harvard, he said:

"Let it be our hope to make a gentleman of every youth who is put under our charge; not a conventional gentleman, but a man of culture, a man of intellectual



resource, a man of public spirit, a man of refinement, with that good taste which is the conscience of the mind, and that conscience which is the good taste of the soul."

And this was the high measure of gentlemanliness which Mr. Lowell fulfilled.

Since his death, many eulogists have declared their belief, that to his poetry alone he would be indebted for his immortality in letters. To me it does not seem of great importance to determine to what special gift, of many, posterity will be indebted for the part they will have in him. I have always valued him chiefly as the prince of critics and the most charming of essayists, knowing that there was not in America his equal, and that Matthew Arnold alone was, in England, claimed as his peer. His learning was extensive and accurate, his perceptions keenly discriminating, his taste scholarly and unerring, his scholarship broad and deep, his comprehension complete, his style alluring and captivating, and his expression enriched with the most charming allusions. It seems to me difficult to see how any one can feel satisfied to hold, as final, his judgment concerning any authors, whose works or literary characteristics have been subjected to Mr. Lowell's subtle criticism, who has failed to read his pages.

Certainly one cannot well afford to be ignorant of what he has uttered especially of Carlyle, of Goethe, of Cervantes, of Milton, of Pope,—more especially of Wordsworth, of Chaucer, of Dryden, of Spenser, of Lessing,—most especially of Dante and of Shakespeare. His essays on those themes are thereon, respectively, the best educators of our generation.

Whether he was greatest as poet or critic, as wit or essayist, as orator or statesmen, this whole generation of Americans has been more or less morally affected by his permeating personality. His influence tends only upward, into the Elysian fields of high thinking, of noble action, of humane sympathies.

It is Harvard's felicity, that men's friendly quarrel over her dead son—

"A man so various, that he seemed to be  
Not one, but"—many men's—"epitome"—

should be as to what was his greatest quality. The world acknowledges that he was eminent in all the ways in which he made essay.

It is our felicity, that we have lived in the same age with him, and that we count ourselves of the same brotherhood of letters with him, and sons of Harvard.





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